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AUTHOR Day, Mildred L.
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ABSTRACT

The increase in adult college students who have been away from formal education for several years and who are seeking degrees to match the status level they have achieved in business requires a specially organized composition course. Two strategies will keep the course organization and content professional, yet meet individual students' needs in grammar and mechanics without frustration or embarrassment. The first strategy is the use of the syllabus as an advance organizer, allowing mature control of study time and flexibility for making up work from unavoidable absences. The second involves an analysis of the course and incorporates eight levels of learning. Level one, signal learning, deals with adults' conditioned responses to school in general and composition in particular. The second level, stimulus/response learning, is positive reinforcement for adult writing efforts. The third and fourth levels are chaining, a sequence of learned responses often no longer contiguous in older students. The fifth level, multiple discrimination learning, deals with varying approaches to organizing ideas, while the sixth, concept discrimination, stresses concept similarities such as metaphors and analogies. The acquisition of structure rules in writing comprises the seventh level, and the eighth level, problem solving, involves knowing the rules so well that one knows when to break them. Use of these strategies can help the composition teacher become more sensitive to the needs of adult students. (HTH)

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Mildred L. Day, Ph.D.
Adjunct Professor, English
Adult Studies
Birmingham-Southern College
Birmingham, AL 35254

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

"Professor, how do I footnote my own opinion?" an older student sitting in the back of the room had the courage to ask me after a long, detailed lecture on citing references. Some of the other students thought it was a ridiculous question, but after the laughter died away, I realized that it pointed up a characteristic of adult students. Adults have something of their own to say, and the mechanics of college writing assignments can be frustrating.

Today more older students are entering college. Most of them will have to take and pass an entering-level course in composition. How well they succeed in learning to write will affect almost everything else they do at the college level. Those of us who teach the composition courses need to be aware of the strengths and limitations of adult students, encouraging them to perform increasingly complex writing tasks, raising their writing skills to their personal levels of experience and maturity.

But it isn't easy. Classes are usually mixed adults and traditional freshmen; texts are not written specifically for adults; adults are less secure in the role of student; adults have more pride. Yet in other ways, adults have the advantage over traditional freshmen: good writing requires rich experience. Still, technical terms, mechanics, difficulty in interpreting the assignment can block the effort of writing.

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What is needed is an appraisal of the sequencing of skills for a composition course with the adult learner in mind. Whatever background skills that are needed must be developed with as little emotional stress as possible, while the advanced skills in composition are being encouraged and strengthened.

The non-traditional student I am considering is distinguished solely on the basis of age. He or she, no matter what ethnic background, is older than the traditional student, and he or she has been away from formal education for several years. Bernard Lovell (Adult Learning, 1980, p.16) characterizes the middle adult years, 25-40, as follows:

For most individuals this period sees the consolidation of both the private and occupational roles. By now he has accumulated a range of material possessions and has established a network of stable social relationships. During this period, depending on the individual's circumstances, he is likely to have continued to make progress in his occupation and in the other spheres of life. Most individuals have plenty of energy for all their interests and responsibilities during the period and much is likely to be achieved. The experience that has been amassed will often be acknowledged by an increase in status and prestige in comparison with early adult status and for many this acknowledgement brings economic security. Attached to this change in status will be the necessity to learn new administrative and social skills. Many women during this period find themselves free to become more fully involved in social and occupational activities outside the home as the children of the family grow up. Some women will now undertake a period of formal training before they enter into their new roles.

These are the typical adult students enrolling in freshman courses, often to achieve a college degree to match the status level they have already achieved in business. For these students the course organization and content must be professional, yet allowing for individual needs in grammar and mechanics to be developed without frustration or embarrassment.

The first strategy is a thorough syllabus. Translating that jargon into English--a thorough course outline. Be specific: overview the full course; explain goals, standards, grading systems; give day-by-day homework deadlines, class assignments, and lecture topics. D. P. Ausubel and Donald Fitzgerald ("Organizer, General Background and Antecedent Learning Variables in Sequential Verbal Learning" 1962) present evidence of the importance of an overview of new material so that it may be meaningfully related to what is already known by the student. A syllabus can be developed into an organizer for the composition course, fill an intellectual need for the adult returning to school. A complete syllabus also fills two other adult needs: first, it allow for mature control of study time; and second, it allows for the flexibility of making up work when an adult must cope with unavoidable absences.

While the first strategy, the syllabus as advance organizer, represents synthesis of the course; the second strategy requires analysis of the course. The art of writing well is a complex skill. It is helpful to analyze its parts separately, visualizing the specific needs of adult students. I have used R. M. Gagné's model of learning as a basis for analysis because, as Lovell suggests (p.45), Gagné coordinates B. F. Skinner's behaviourist psychology with the more abstract concepts developed by the Gestaltists, developing a hierarchy of learning skills. Although Gagné works primarily with learning skills for children, the hierarchy he develops can also be applied to composition skills for an adult program.

Gagné's eight types of learning (The Conditions of Learning, 3d ed., 1977) begin with signal learning, stimulus-response, and chain learning, then advance to multiple discrimination, concept learning, acquisition of rules, and problem solving.

Level one, signal learning

The first level of learning is signal learning. This is the concept associated with conditioned responses and Pavlov's bell. Teaching adults to write is far beyond the level of conditioned response--but conditioned responses, that is, responses to past conditioning, often must be dealt with tactfully in teaching adults. Adults, particularly those a long time out of school, come to class with apprehensiveness from childhood memories of the school experience. These negative experiences are recalled in a period of stress that is similar, and sitting in a composition class after a dozen years can be that kind of stress. "Writer's Block" can be a symptom, a critical problem in a course requiring deadlines for seven essays and a research paper.

I have three suggestions to relieve this kind of initial negative emotional response:

(1) Grade on competence at the end of the course, avoiding grades that may be discouraging during the initial efforts.

(2) Stress that you will "edit" rather than "mark" the papers. Editing is positive help toward expressing ideas well; marking merely notes failed effort.

(3) Use black ink rather than red. We all have conditioned responses to seeing red ink on our efforts.

The second level, stimulus/response

The second level of learning is stimulus/response. This type includes Skinner's concept of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning is the use of reinforcement following desired action. In a composition course, the teacher provides positive reinforcement by returning papers promptly and by individual conferences where the adult student's work can be discussed, and its strengths, no matter how clumsy, can be noted. Extrinsic reinforcement is not the only operant in adult writing, however. Adults, many of whom have read widely, are also judging their own efforts and receive positive reinforcement from satisfaction at writing effectively done.

The third and fourth levels, motor and verbal chaining

Chaining describes a learned response that signals a subsequent learned response, motor or verbal. Starting a car is an example of motor chaining; memorizing a part in a play, verbal chaining. Following directions for an assignment can also involve chaining, a chaining that can break down when an adult, out of touch with formal education for several years, may lack the necessary terms and conventions. Even the conventions like where to put a footnote number in the sentence, or what the numbers on the back of a library book signify can be enough to break the chaining required to complete an assignment.

What I provide at this point is a "panic prevention kit." Done with a light touch, it is a sample research paper done on the subject of doing a research paper. It provides explanation

of the assignment both visually and verbally. "The panic prevention kit" is both show and tell. It is done on typing paper, not printed nor reduced as in the handbooks. I try to illustrate and define every term my adult students have questioned me about. I talk about the why of footnotes, the how, and the proper form--referring the student to the textbook for complete details. I explain bibliography cards and research methods, and what to do when the journal needed is not in the college library. I present all the conventions: thesis statement, outline, footnotes, bibliography. I include an appendix with sample bibliography and note cards, directions for finding a book in the library stacks, and names of all the librarians in case they still need help. I also include the college print-out on plagiarism and a tear-off sheet with blacked-in margins and numbered lines to serve as a typewriter guide. "The panic prevention kit" is based on the textbook my department selects, referring the student to appropriate reference pages, but homelier and more detailed than the textbook itself.

The fifth level, multiple discrimination

Gagné's fifth level is multiple discrimination. An essential feature of many freshman composition courses is the recognition and writing of different types of essays, the development of multiple discrimination in prose composition. Actually each type, from process and description to classification and argument, represents varying approaches to organizing ideas. The course, ideally, should also deal directly with classification

and logic as intellectual skills. While adult needs on the earlier levels can be met with appropriate conferences and hand-outs, this level requires a good collection of the types of prose essays. Following Gagné's suggestion, the process for teaching multiple discrimination is to begin with examples that are clear, exaggerated distinctions of types, progressing to the more subtle distinctions and the blends.

The sixth level, concept discrimination.

Concept discrimination is, of course, the essential structure of all adult education. In contrast to the previous level, multiple discrimination which stresses how items are different, concept discrimination stresses how things are alike. New concepts are usually signalled by new vocabulary. In a composition course, techniques for using definitions come early, a direct approach to concept discrimination in prose. But in composition, concepts are not limited to new vocabulary. They may also be signalled by longer work strings: metaphors, analogies, entire works. A teacher of composition must encourage adults to see and use these techniques.

The seventh level, acquisition of rules

Rules and patterns are the stuff and substance of a composition course, even more so for adults returning to school. Rules, explicit and implicit, control correct grammar and spelling as well as effective writing style. Rules for structure for the various types of essays can be put on the board and copied into notes: how to write a "funnel-shaped" opening paragraph, where to put a thesis statement, how to arrange paragraphs, how to

close an essay satisfactorily. Time spent on rules may be boring to the recent high school graduate in your class, but it will be reassuring to the adults. Like the organizer effect of the syllabus at the beginning of the course, rules can be organizers for specific tasks, allowing the adult to understand the assignment and relate the task to past experience.

The eighth level, problem solving

All of the steps lead toward level eight, problem solving. Problem solving involves all the approaches and rules, requiring the student to work out new problems by reexamination of past approaches, with selection and adaptation as necessary. Problem solving is the concept of knowing the rules so well that you know when to break them. It releases creativity.

At this point, the adult no longer depends on a teacher. Extrinsic feedback of operant conditioning (Gagné's second level) is replaced by the reinforcement of the intrinsic discrimination of the adult.

Confidence and competence in writing are the goals of the freshman composition courses. Adults as non-traditional students can achieve successfully if the teacher is sensitive to their individual needs and provides general help through the strategies of synthesis and analysis to sequence the task for effective learning.

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